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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Presidential Address

1941

ON STYLE

BY

THE RT. HON. VISCOUNT SAMUEL

G.C.B., G.B.E., HON. D.C.L., M.A.

August 1941



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ON STYLE

IT may seem strange that, at the height of a terrible war, when the world is in a turmoil and our own country in danger, the English Association should still pursue its activities, and that its President for the year should take as the subject of his Address a topic so remote as Style in literature. But we cannot permit our cultural life to stop. Many sacrifices are inevitable, but that one is not. If, throughout the years of the conflict with Napoleon, Britain had allowed her pens to be silenced by the exigencies of war, many of the greatest works that make her literature illustrious would never have seen the light. The precedent applies in all provinces and at all levels of the realm of mind. Besides, resolute as we are that the war shall end with the victory of the English-speaking peoples, and foreseeing that this will imply in the coming years a moral leadership of the world, it is easy to foresee also an added prestige and a wider influence for the English language. Already, when John Morley was writing his *Compromise*, he was able to say: 'Our language is the most widely spoken of all tongues, its literature second to none in variety and power.' To-day that may be repeated with even stronger emphasis, and to-morrow, we may hope with greater force still. So that the English Association, whose proud function it is to defend the purity of the language and to promote its sound teaching at home and overseas, has not a lessened responsibility in these times, but very clearly an increased responsibility. It dare not allow its work to fall into abeyance.

And language is not only the vehicle for conveying ideas; it is part of the human environment; it has a share in the deep influence of environment on thought and action. A language which is spoken and written with care and dignity, as French is generally spoken and written, has an effect, civilizing and stimulating, upon the national character. Can the same be said with equal truth of English, either here or in America? Since the only name that will include both the British Commonwealth and the United States is the name of 'English-speaking peoples', at least let us both learn to speak it well.

If we were asked to choose what is the chief requirement for a good style of writing, I would suggest for my part that it is Clarity. After all, as Confucius said, 'The whole end of speech is to be understood.' It is, too, an act of discourtesy to the reader to put him to the trouble of puzzling out your meaning. 'La clarté,' said

Fabre, 'est la souveraine politesse de qui manie une plume.' And there is a saying I have seen quoted from Quintilian: 'Care should be taken, not that the reader may understand if he will; but that he must understand, whether he will or not.'

George Meredith, in one of his letters, says that good style is 'a noble matter in an easy manner'. Meredith's own style was natural to himself; he wrote as he talked; but no one would say of it that it was easy. And it is because of that defect that Meredith is now in eclipse; although in intellectual brilliance he far outshines all our English novelists, and his copious, original, vivifying thought bears the authentic stamp of genius. It may be that in the next generation, after the half-century of obscurity through which most great writers pass after their death, his light will again shine resplendent. Browning, too, is paying the penalty of obscurity, and, in spite of his great qualities, now appeals only to a few.

Closely allied to clarity is simplicity. 'In character, in manner, in style, in all things,' said Longfellow, 'the supreme excellence is simplicity.' Or, as Samuel Butler put it: 'A man's style in any art should be like his dress—it should attract as little attention as possible.' That is the rule for daily life and ordinary literature; but there may be occasions, even in dress, for splendour; and there may be themes in literature where magnificence is the right quality. The style of Shakespeare is not simple, nor that of Milton, or Burke, or Ruskin; but no one would condemn them for that. There is, however, always the danger that the magniloquent may degenerate into the verbose. When dealing with commonplace matters, elaborate language becomes pedantic, and offends. Even so good a stylist as Hardy was sometimes at fault. I noticed not long ago, for example, in a description in *The Woodlanders*, of Grace Melbury coming back to her old home after some years' absence, going over the house and finding it too large for her present needs, that Hardy writes, she 'concluded her perambulation of this now uselessly commodious edifice'. To give another instance of occasional lapse by a great writer, Walter Scott, in a letter to Moore about his meeting with Byron, says: 'For about two months I had the advantage of a considerable intimacy with this distinguished individual.'

The official mind seems to have a special inclination to verbiage. I remember that when the Traffic Department of the Metropolitan Police introduced what are well called the Roundabouts, it wished to give them the official name of 'The Gyratory System'; and I recall seeing in some of the public parks in America notices showing the way to the swimming-pool, with the words 'To the

Natatorium'. The good sense of ordinary people usually puts a stop to these pedantries. When flying came in we talked of 'aeronauts', 'aviators', and 'aeroplanes'. The excellent word 'airman' soon came into use; but only now is 'aeroplane' giving place to 'air-plane', and, still better, to 'plane'. Sometimes the public are hard put to it to find the right simplification. When some Frenchman in the early part of the nineteenth century, introducing a new type of public vehicle, called it 'Voiture omnibus', it was abbreviated in this country to 'bus'—the most objectionable, I think, of all our new words. This is the retribution we suffer for too much scholarship. And now we find the army, when it conveys troops by road, talking of 'embussing' and 'debussing'; and I read in *The Spectator* that the study of questions of road transport is now being called 'busology'! It is too much honour for what is, after all, only a dative plural suffix.

Mr. A. P. Herbert carried on for some time, in the pages of *Punch*, what he called a 'Word War', gallantly waged with the object of getting rid of superfluous phrases and of purifying generally the use of English. It was a useful support for the objects of this Association. Among other faults which he attacked was the misuse of the word 'following' as a preposition, where 'after' would do as well—although that is not always the case, for 'following' conveys an idea of cause and effect which 'after' does not. There is also the similar misuse of 'prior to' instead of 'before'. And he has a special objection, well founded, to the unnecessary insertion of 'as to', which is so frequent; for example, 'the question as to whether', instead of 'the question whether'. Needless to say, A. P. Herbert protests against the very common use of the word 'literally', merely as a form of emphasis, and contrary to its meaning. I have often observed examples of that myself. I remember a colleague telling me how he had received a rather unreasonable deputation, 'but,' he said, 'I gave them a good talking to, and they left the room literally with their tails between their legs'. Another instance is: 'In this case, the wish was literally father to the thought.' And in a novelist's description of an audience at a new play that was expected to be sensational: 'Our eyes were literally pinned to the curtain until it went up.'

I forget whether A. P. Herbert drew attention to the expressions, now often heard, 'very unique' and 'the true facts'. I was distressed to read, only a few days ago, in the report of a ministerial answer in the House of Commons by so admirable a stylist as our present chairman (Mr. Harold Nicolson) that 'the true facts' had been communicated. What are 'untrue facts'?

The campaign has been lately reinforced from the most powerful quarter of all. You will remember the circular from the Prime Minister to the Civil Service, asking that circumlocution should stop. This will probably have a wholesome effect, not only directly in the Government Departments, but gradually everywhere. At the same time, I hope that this simplification will not extend to the traditional forms of correspondence between Ministers and the Sovereign—verbiage, no doubt, but with a certain stateliness, and charm as well. A letter to the King will begin: 'Secretary Sir John Jones'—or whoever it may be—'with his humble duty to Your Majesty, begs to submit . . .' this or that; and then, having begun in the third person, ends, in defiance of all the rules of composition, in the first person: 'I am, Sir, Your Majesty's obedient servant and loyal subject, John Jones.' And I hope that the dispatches of ambassadors to the Foreign Secretary will still be allowed to end: 'I am, Sir, with great truth and respect . . .' Although we would all accept the general principle, perhaps each of us has some favourite little piece of verbosity which he would be sorry to see swept away in the general clearance.

But clarity and simplicity of style is more than a mere question of taste, and touches matters much more important than official vocabularies. It has a bearing, even, upon the most important matter of all. The troubles in the world to-day are mainly due, everyone can see, to the confusion of thought that prevails in the modern world. In religion, ethics, politics, economics, there are no longer broad fundamental principles generally accepted. We may find that this is mainly due, directly or indirectly, to the impact of modern science upon ideas, institutions, industries—upon the whole structure of our civilization. In such a juncture as this, it should properly be the function of philosophy to give guidance to the world's thought. But the world does not think of turning to the philosophers. Ordinary people know nothing of philosophy, are hardly aware that it exists. Even in the universities it is studied only by a handful. And the reason may be seen to be, not only that philosophy has concentrated far too much on themes that are transcendental, or highly technical; but also because most books on philosophy have been written in a style that is involved, obscure, very repellent to the layman. In Presidential Addresses to another Society—the British Institute of Philosophy—I have appealed to professional philosophers to condescend to be understood; and not write in a style which might be described as 'Philosophy *with* Tears, in Words of Five

Syllables'. Of late years there has been a welcome movement in that direction; and when philosophy once more realizes, as in Plato's day, the importance of style, she may perhaps recover some of the influence that she wielded among the Greeks, and help to lead the present world out of its intellectual chaos to order and stability.

Consider again the present position of poetry in Great Britain. When one looks back over its past glories, the almost unrelieved barrenness of these days is heart-breaking. Again it is a question of style. This generation is as prolific of ideas as any other. The turbulent and tragic times in which we live evoke in every man the most poignant emotions. Great themes abound, crying out for expression. Yet our present-day poets, for the most part, have fallen into a habit of intellectual contortion, a fashion of turgid obscurity, which debars them from all influence upon the age, from giving it either solace or stimulus. They have contracted the appeal of British poetry from the mind and heart of a nation to the languid interest of a sophisticated clique.


On the other hand, in prose we have a number of admirable writers. Each of us would make his own list of present-day authors, and the lists would naturally differ; but if we look back among the authors who have gone, or who have fallen silent, we see George Moore, Lowes Dickinson, Max Beerbohm, and I would add T. E. Lawrence, who are not unworthy to take place in the long line of the fine writers of English prose.

With clarity and simplicity another requisite is care. You may remember Dr. Johnson's saying, 'What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure.' A great master of style like Anatole France would write and rewrite a single paragraph, perhaps four or five times, until he was satisfied. 'Caressez longtemps votre phrase,' he said; 'elle finira par sourire.' His elaborate process leaves no trace; his sentences flow on as smooth and limpid as a quiet river. But when lesser artists allow the carefulness to become apparent, we feel at once that the writing is self-conscious and the effect is lost. I admire very much Walter Pater's writing, but one has that feeling sometimes with him, and especially with Robert Louis Stevenson. Over-carefulness soon develops into mannerism. Gibbon is the most obvious example, with his regular cadences, turning almost into a sing-song.

A style may be clear, simple, and careful, and yet fail if it is dull. A book is not likely to live unless it is lively. If the writer has not been alert, the reader will not be alert either. It was Pater who, in *Marius the Epicurean*, spoke of 'the principle, axiomatic in litera-

ture: that to know when one's self is interested, is the first condition of interesting other people'.

Yet style, after all, is merely the manner of presentation; and matter is more important than manner. Samuel Butler attributes to a 'friend in New Zealand' a saying; 'Words are the clothes that thoughts wear—only the clothes'; or, as Bacon put it: 'the first distemper of learning is when men study words and not matter'; and Hobbes: 'Words are wise men's counters, they do but reckon with them; but they are the money of fools.'

There is all the difference in the world between having something to say, and having to say something—as all of us know who are called upon to listen to many after-dinner speeches—or to make them. The great periods in any art have been when men felt that they had that in them which the spirit impelled them to express; not when they were merely skilled craftsmen looking for subjects through which they could display their proficiency. 'In old times,' said Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*, 'men used their powers of painting to show the objects of faith; in later times they used the objects of faith that they might show their powers of painting.' And Matthew Arnold hit the mark when he said: 'The difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Dryden, Pope and all their school, is briefly this: their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits, genuine poetry is conceived and composed in their soul.' It is no use, then, perfecting a style merely in order to convey thought that is confused and insipid; offering a draught of muddy water in a cup of gold. 

Whether a writer has something to say that is worth saying must depend upon his own personality. 'Talent alone cannot make a writer,' says Emerson, 'there must be a man behind the book'; and Newman: 'Style is the shadow of a personality'; and Walt Whitman:

Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches this touches a man.

A heavy responsibility lies upon the writer who wields the weapon of an attractive and effective style. He may successfully spread bad ideas. A writer of genius like Nietzsche, putting pernicious doctrine into a form brilliant and dynamic, may do infinite mischief. A well-written book may hold an undeserved influence over long periods. 'Style', said F. S. Oliver, 'is a wonderful pickle that is able to preserve mediocrity of thought under favourable conditions for many centuries.' And not only mediocrity, but perversity. Let not the purveyor of bad ideas well ex-

pressed raise the plea in defence that the work of art is its own justification. 'Art for art's sake' is a dangerous maxim, which reason will not support; for there is no human activity of any kind which can claim to be an end in itself, and exempt from all restraint. The patriot, the industrialist, the clericalist, the communist, each is sometimes inclined to assert that his aims are so valuable that no one should dare challenge them or lay conditions on their pursuit. The consequence has often proved disastrous. The artist no more than anyone else may exalt himself above the moral law; and a good style is no excuse for bad doctrine or a corrupting influence.

A great literature demands a living language, that grows, and develops, and fits the needs of its time. Archaism is always a sign of decadence. That is why eighteenth-century classicism produced no work of the highest rank in any of the arts. Nor is imitation of the primitive any more praiseworthy than imitation of the ornate and sophisticated. The Chatterton forgeries, and Macpherson's *Ossian*, although it commanded the admiration of Napoleon and even of Goethe, are rightly condemned as mere pastiches. There is no reason why British sculpture of to-day should copy the style of Benin, or Easter Island, or our painting model itself on the drawings of the nursery school. As an example of imitativeness, the architects of the first skyscrapers in New York, trained in the academies of Europe, thought it only seemly to put as finales on the straight simple shafts they were commissioned to build, copies of bits of feudal castles and Gothic chapels; they may be seen perched up there to-day, detracting from one of the finest manifestations of the authentic spirit of the present age.

An association such as ours will not seek to impose upon English writing and speaking a mere conformity with classic models. When scholarship becomes scholasticism it kills. An age cannot produce great literature by copying the literature of the ages that were great, but only by itself being great. The prose and poetry, the architecture and sculpture, of classical Greece and of the Early Renaissance in Italy, were marked by a beauty and gravity, by a dignity, that is seldom found in the arts of to-day. It was because those ages had a pride in themselves, which their art reflected; but ours has lost pride. We are too painfully aware of our own deficiencies. We are ashamed of the failures and injustices of our social systems; we are appalled by the recrudescence of war, on a scale more devastating and in forms more horrible than history has ever known. But if the present cataclysm is followed by an effort, more far-reaching and more successful than after the

last war, to re-establish order and tranquillity in the world; and if here we are able to clean our country from the social evils and the uglinesses that degrade it, are able to make it worthy of the sacrifices of its people and of their status among the nations—then our age may take confidence in itself. Then it will not be afraid to clothe itself in a noble garment. Then our architecture and all our arts, not least our English speech and writing, will be found to wear, naturally and without seeking, the qualities of dignity and grace.



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